

## Side Trip, Part IV

By Timothy Zahn; Illustrations by Elizabeth Danforth

Zekka Thyne's airspeeders were stored on the low end of a split-level section of the fortress roof, inside a bunker-like structure with a single entrance from the stronghold proper and a single hangar bay-style exit. Two guards were on duty, but their attention was turned outward, toward the distant blaster fire coming from the woods around the fortress, and neither noticed the shadowy bulk of Rathe Palror moving quietly up behind them. A pair of deceptively gentle-looking hand movements from the Tunroth, and both guards temporarily lost the ability to notice anything.

"I'll have to get you to teach me that trick," Trell commented, ducking down to peer through the window of a likely looking airspeeder. The vehicle looked ordinary enough, but in the dim light he could see the add-on weapons control board tucked coyly away under the main panel on the passenger side. *Perfect*. "We'll take this one. You still have that molecular stiletto?"

"Here," the Tunroth rumbled, pausing in his task of stripping the guards' weapons to dig the slender cylinder from his belt. "Should we not take one of the armored vehicles instead?" he added, pointing his chin horns toward one of the three KAAC Freerunners parked near the wide exit opening as he lobbed the weapon in Trell's direction.

"They're a little obvious for in-town driving," Trell told him as he caught the stiletto. Extending the almost invisible blade, he began carefully cutting around the airspeeder's lock mechanism. "This one's got some hidden firepower -- means it's probably got some hidden armor, too."

By the time Palror joined him, he had the door open and was sitting in the driver's seat. "Yeah, this'll do just fine," he said, pulling the weapons board out for a closer look. "Are you hunters any good with non-traditional stuff like light laser cannon and concussion grenade launchers?"

"A *shturlan* can work with all weapons," Palror said, dropping his appropriated blaster rifles onto the rear seat and peering in over Trell's shoulder.

"Good -- you're hired," Trell said, starting to strap himself in. "I'll drive."

Trell wasn't sure what exactly was happening out in the woods surrounding Thyne's fortress. But whatever it was, it definitely seemed to be getting worse. The forest was alive with the muted flickers of multiple blaster fire, the light peeking coyly out through gaps in the leaf canopy on at least two sides of the stronghold. "I sure hope they're too busy out there to bother with us," he muttered as he eased the airspeeder through the opening and onto the landing pad just outside the bunker. "Corran and Hal are going to have their hands full getting through all that."

"But less trouble than it could be," Palror said. "Do you not remember? Thyne has dispersed many of his people on errands."

Trell grimaced. "Yeah, I remember, One group to go grab our cargo, the other to snatch Maranne and Rijj."

"But at Jodo Kast's recommendation," Palror reminded him. "If Kast is truly here to oppose Thyne, then he will not allow harm to come to our companions."

"I don't buy that," Trell growled. "Even if Corran and Hal were right about that, it doesn't mean he cares slork droppings about the rest of us. *And* that assumes they were right, which we don't have any proof of. Personally, I'd say there's an even chance that Thyne and Kast cooked up the whole thing together to expose a couple of undercover CorSec agents and lure 'em into a trap. In which case, they're probably already dead."

"If so, then we should be likewise," Palror pointed out. "Who are we that Kast would allow us to escape."

"Yeah, well, we haven't exactly escaped yet," Trell reminded him tartly, eying the open air off the edge of the landing pad with stomach-churning apprehension. But procrastination wouldn't gain them anything except increased odds that someone inside the fortress would notice they were missing and raise the alarm.

And besides -- thanks to Kast -- Maranne and Rijj were walking into a trap out there at the Mynock's Haven cantina. Had possibly already walked into it. Rijj he wasn't so much worried about -- the guy was a Rebel agent and not his responsibility. But Maranne was his partner, and he was shrugged if he'd abandon her to Thyne's thugs.

"We waste time," Palror rumbled at his side. "I will not leave Rijj in danger."

"Likewise," Trell said, keying in the repulsorlifts and throwing power to the drive. He wouldn't leave Maranne, and Palror wouldn't leave Rii; and as the fortress roof dropped away beneath them he realized with hindsight's usual clarity that Kast had probably set up the various groupings with precisely those different loyalties in mind.

Though to what end, he still didn't know. And wasn't sure he wanted to.

He was still mulling over the question thirty seconds later when the two TIE bombers dropped neatly into formation beside him.

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They'd been sitting in the Mynock's Haven for nearly half an hour; and in Rii Winward's opinion, it was yet another bust. "They're not coming," he said quietly to the woman on the other side of the small table. "Whoever we were supposed to meet here, they aren't coming."

"I think you're right," Maranne Darmic growled back, scratching viciously at the nape of her neck. "Score another big fat zero for the great and marvelous Jodo Kast."

"The greatly incompetent, you mean," Rii said, looking with distaste at the yellow and red jebwa flower in the center of their table. Kast's datacard had specified the flower as their identification marker, but so far none of the cantina's other patrons had given it a second glance. Considering the clientele, most of their first glances had been humiliating enough.

"Yeah," Maranne agreed. "It makes you seriously wonder about his chances of getting Trell and Palror and the others out of Zekka Thyne's place."

"It makes *me* wonder if he even wants to get them out," Rii countered darkly.

Maranne eyed him closely. "You think this whole thing was a setup?"

"It's looking more and more that way," Rii said, scowling as he glanced around the cantina. "Look at the series of events. First he sends Trell to the wrong booth in Treasure Ship Row, which apparently tips off Thyne and his people that we're looking for Borbor Crisk. Then he sends Trell, Palror, and Hal back and lets them get snatched. Finally, he goes there himself with Corran and sends us off on this idiot's errand. Someone in Kast's business can't possibly be that incompetent and have survived this long."



"You think it's someone else posing as Kast?" Maranne suggested. "I mean, all we've ever seen is his armor."

"Possibly," Rii said. "But now remember where this whole mess actually started: aboard an Imperial Star Destroyer."

"With us squeezed into running an Imperial captain's errand." Maranne swore gently. "You're right. How stupid can one group of people be, anyway?"

"We're in line for some prizes, all right," Rii agreed. "The only question is what exactly the game is that the Imperials are playing."

"I vote for them trying to stir up trouble between Thyne and Crisk," Maranne said. "Maybe looking for an excuse to come down hard on both sides."

"Using the spice and gems as bait," Rijj said. "Still, whatever Kast's going for, there's one thing he doesn't know."

Maranne smiled tightly. "That the cargo isn't aboard the *Hopskip* anymore."

"Exactly." Rijj dropped a couple of coins on the table and stood up. "Come on, let's get out of here. Crisk's people aren't going to show."

"So what's our next move?" Maranne asked, standing up beside him.

"Kast's Plan B, I guess," Rijj said, turning toward the door and elbowing them a path through a pack of loiterers. "We take our sample boxes to Thyne's fortress and see if we can make a deal to buy Trell and Palror out."

Maranne caught up to his side. "You're going to follow Kast's plan?" she asked incredulously. "What are you, crazy?"

"No, just desperate," Rijj conceded grimly. "Aside from the two of us storming the place, I don't see any other options."

"What about your--" Maranne threw a quick glance around and lowered her voice. "What about your friends?"

Rijj grimaced. His friends: the Rebel Alliance. A reasonable enough request, he supposed, especially since the only reason he and Palror had been aboard the *Hopskip* in the first place was to baby-sit the load of blasters Trell and Maranne had agreed to smuggle to the Rebels on Derra IV.

Unfortunately -- "They can't help us," he told her regretfully. "Even if the leaders agreed, it would take too long to gather together enough of a force to take on Thyne, Corellian Security, *and* the local Imperial garrison."

"You sure they just don't want Prince Xizor and Black Sun mad at them?" Maranne asked nastily.

"You have to pick your fights carefully, Maranne," Rijj sighed. "Personally, I think we've already bit off more than we can swallow."

"I suppose you're right," Maranne muttered. "Fine. Let's give Plan B a try."

They had reached the door now, sliding their way through the middle of an incoming group of Duros and heading out into the muggy night air. The *Hopskip*'s dilapidated landspeeder was parked in the small lot to the left

"Excuse me?" a hesitant voice called.

Rijj turned, his hand dropping automatically to the butt of his blaster. A heavysset man had emerged from the cantina a handful of steps behind them, their jebwa flower clutched in a meaty hand. "Yes?"

"You forgot your flower," the man said, lobbing it through the air toward him. Automatically, Rijj reached up to catch it

And suddenly there was a small blaster in the heavy man's fist. "Nice and easy," the man said. "Seltzy?"

"I'm on it," a voice said from somewhere behind Rijj. There was a quick set of approaching footsteps, and Rijj felt his blaster being lifted from its holster. Another moment, and Maranne had been disarmed as well. "Got 'em."

"Now just keep moving," the first gunman said, gesturing Rijj and Maranne in the direction they'd been going. "Let's go take a look at your landspeeder."

The parking lot was dark and deserted. But it wasn't going to stay deserted for long. Even as Rijj led the way toward the landspeeder he could see shadowy forms drifting in from all directions. Whoever had gotten the drop on them didn't seem interested in taking any chances. "You want to tell us which one's yours?" the heavysset man asked.

"You want to tell us whose side you're on?" Rijj countered.

The other's eyes flashed. "Don't push it, scum," he warned harshly. "You're in enough trouble with us as it is."

"Must be with Zekka Thyne," Maranne said ruefully.

"Must be," Rijj agreed, his heart pounding a little harder. So it was definitely to Plan B now. "It's that dirt-brown one over there."

Two of the approaching thugs veered toward the landspeeder, the rest forming a loose but competent enough guard circle around the prisoners and their two escorts.

A double-sided circle, Rijj noted with interest, with as many of their members facing outward as inward. Expecting trouble, maybe?

The thugs had the storage compartment open now and with grunts of satisfaction hauled out the two *sleight* boxes. "Got 'em, Grobber," one of them said. "Couple of *sleight* boxes, just like the man said."

"All set to fill up, huh?" the heavysset man said, throwing a dark look at Rijj. "I guess Kast wasn't blowing smoke rings after all." Rijj threw a glance at Maranne, got the same look in return from her.

They'd been right; Kast was definitely playing some crazy double- or triple-edged game here. "Kast told you about this?" he asked.

"Sure did," Grobber assured him. "So what were these for, the first payment?"

Rijj shook his head. "Sorry, but I can't help you. We were hired to deliver the boxes and that was it."

"Sure," Grobber growled. "Just deliver the boxes. And if Crisk just happened to fill them up while your back was turned -- well, hey, that's none of *your* business, right? Promk, what the frink are you doing?"

"What does it look like?" one of the men at the landspeeder retorted. He had carried one of the boxes around to the hood and was in the process of popping the seal with a knife. "A couple of wise guys, a couple of empty boxes; I figured it might be fun to send 'em on to Crisk with their heads inside."

Rijj was suddenly aware of his collar pressing against his throat. "I don't think that would be a good idea," he said, striving to keep his voice even. "You don't know where the rest of the boxes are."

"We don't, huh?" Grobber sneered, digging out a comlink and thumbing it on. "Skinkner? Hey, Skinkner, look alive."

"Funny, Grobber, funny," a twisted voice came back. "What d'ya want?"

"You at the Dewback Storage yard yet?"

"Yeah, 'course we are. If you were hoping to report us to Thyne for slogging off, you're out of luck."

"Wouldn't think of it," Grobber said, sending another sneer toward Rijj. "Still think we don't know where the rest of the boxes are, hotshot?"

Rijj felt his stomach tighten. So much for Plan B. So much, too, for any leverage they might have had against Thyne and his mob. Any chance of rescuing Palror and Trell was now squarely in his and Maranne's laps.

Assuming they were able to find a way out of this, their own private mess. Carefully, keeping his movements casual, Rijj looked around the ring of thugs, trying to formulate some kind of reasonable plan --

*"Mother of smoke!"*

Rijj jerked his head back around. Standing beside the landspeeder, Promk had finally gotten the *sleight* box open... and even in the faint light Rijj could see the stunned look on his face. "Grobber -- you gotta -- what the frinking --?"

"Have you gone dust-happy?" Grobber demanded, striding toward him. He got two steps, and then suddenly his face changed, too. "What the--?" he gasped, all but leaping the rest of the distance to Promk's side.

Rijj sniffed the night breeze carefully, caught the faint odor of spice. "You were saying something about empty boxes?" he asked.

Grobber ignored him. "Get the other one open," he ordered, pulling out a knife of his own and probing delicately into the spice. "Selty, get over here. The rest of you, watch for trouble."

Selty joined his boss as Promk brought around the second box and setto work, and for a moment the two thugs conversed in low voices over the spice box. The debate was interrupted by the crack of breaking duraplast, and the two joined Promk by the second box. Someone whistled in awe. "Grobber -- are those --?"

"Durindfire gems," Grobber said, lifting his eyes like twin turbolasers to Rijj's face. "Let's have it, pal, and let's have it straight and fast. What the frink kind of game are you playing, anyway?"

"I told you before: we're not playing any games," Rijj told him. "We were sent to deliver the cargo, and that's it. If there's a game going on, someone else is running it."

"Kast," one of the other thugs snarled.

"Or Kast and Crisk," Grobber snarled back, yanking out his comlink again. "Skinkner? Wake up, Skinkner."

"What d'ya want?" the other's voice demanded. "Frink it all, Grobber--"

"Shut up and listen," Grobber bit out. "You looked in any of those boxes yet?"

"Course not. Thyne said to just watch them until Crisk's blaster-boys came to fill them with--"

"You idiot -- they're already full," Grobber snapped. "Which means the contract's already been filled."

The voice on the comlink swore. "Kast."

"That's my bet," Grobber said. "Start getting your boys together -- I'm going to raise Control." He keyed the comlink again. "Control? This is Grobber. Control?"

"Grobber!" a new voice half barked, half gasped. "We've been trying to raise you for half an hour -- where the frink are you?"

"At the Mynock's Haven," Grobber said. "Listen--"

"No, *you* listen," the other cut him off. "We're under attack here, skrag it -- you've got to get back right away."

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," Grobber said. "What attack? Who's attacking?"

"Who do you think? The frinking Imperials, that's who."

Grobber threw a startled glance at Selty. "The *Imperials*?"

"Started out as some anti-Rebel operation," Control said. "At least, that's what they told us. Then someone took a shot at them, and suddenly here they are, burning their way through the east wall."

"Skrag! Where's Thyne?"

"I don't know -- we can't find him."

"Must have gotten out," Selty muttered.

"Or ducked into some private bunker," Grobber said. "All right, Control, we're on our way. Skinkner?"

"We're packing up, too," Skinkner's voice confirmed. "You want us to do anything with these other *sleight* boxes?"

"To blazes with the boxes," Control snapped. "We need you *here*."

"No, pack 'em up and bring 'em along," Grobber said.

"Grobber--"

"They're worth a fortune," Grobber growled. "Thyne'll have our heads if we leave 'em behind. Come on, how much trouble can a few Imperials be?"

Faintly over the comlink came the sound of a distant explosion. "That answer your question?" Control snarled. "Get the frink back here."

And with a sudden hiss, the comlink went dead. "They're jamming it," Grobber growled, shoving the cylinder back into his belt. "Selty, you take Promk and Bullkey and get these two and their landspeeder back to the fortress. Everyone else, back to the airspeeders. *Move* it!"

The others scattered. "Don't get any ideas," Grobber warned softly, glaring from under creased eyebrows at Riij and Maranne. "We're a long ways from being done with you two yet."

With that he stomped off after the rest of his mob, disappearing just as they had appeared back into the shadows again. "Get over here," Selty snapped, waving Riij and Maranne forward. Somewhere in the distance an avian or insect whistled, sounding strangely out of place in the urban setting. "Bullkey?"

"I'm on 'em," a deep voice came from behind Riij, the confidence backed up by a blaster nudge in the back. "Come on, move it."

Riij started forward; and as he did so, Maranne veered slightly toward him and nudged him with her elbow. "Get ready," she murmured, just loud enough for him to hear. At the landspeeder, Promk, under Selty's direction, had picked up the box containing the Durindfire

gems and was carrying it back toward the storage compartment. The strange avian whistled again; and suddenly, inexplicably, one of the bottom edges of the box split open, spilling the gems out onto the ground.

"Promk!" Selty squeaked, aghast. "You stupid idiot." He jumped forward, grabbing at the box as Promk tried to turn it upside down. For a moment they both fumbled with it, the prisoners temporarily forgotten.

And from behind Rij came a short gurgle and a muffled thump.

Beside him, he sensed Maranne preparing to charge. "Not yet," he muttered, touching her warningly as he lengthened his stride. Preoccupied with the spilled gems, Selty and Promk hadn't yet noticed what had happened over here. Another four paces... three... if they'd just fight with the box another few seconds... one...



"Now," he murmured; and jumping forward, he put his left palm down on the landspeeder's hood and leaped over the vehicle to slam both feet hard against Promk's chest.

The thug didn't even have a chance to gurgle as he hit the ground, the *sleight* box spinning out of his hands into the darkness. Selty did have time for a startled curse and a grab for his holstered blaster before he went down with Maranne on top of him. A savage jab with her knee, and he went limp.

"Are you injured?" Palror rumbled from behind them.

"No, we're fine," Rij assured him, regaining his balance and turning around. Behind the Tunroth, the third thug was lying in an unnaturally crumpled heap. "Nice job with Bullkey," he added.

"Not to mention the box," Maranne added, retrieving their appropriated blasters from Selty's belt and tossing Rij's back to him. "How'd you manage that one?"

"That was mine," Trell said, stepping out from behind one of the other parked landspeeders and crossing to them. "Just an exquisitely well-thrown molecular stiletto."

"A whistle code and a molecular stiletto," Rij said, shaking his head wonderingly. "You two are just full of tricks, aren't you?"

"The stiletto was a gift," Trell said, crouching down beside the *sleight* box. "Blast -- the blade's broken."

"Never mind the blade," Maranne said, crouching down beside him. "Get the gems."

"Forget the gems," Rij told her, peering off in the direction Grobber and the others had gone. The rescue had been remarkably quiet; but if Grobber took it into his head to fly over this spot on the way back to Thyne's fortress, the four of them could still end up fertilizing a patch of razor grass. "Let's just get out of here."

"But--"

"No, he's right," Trell said through clearly clenched teeth. "If whatever's going on back at Thyne's place dies down fast enough we could still find Grobber's buddies camping out in the *Hopskip*'s cargo bay. Just grab the box and whatever's still left inside."

Maranne hissed something vile sounding, but she nevertheless stood up, the now half-empty box in her hands. "Fine," she said bitterly. "What about the spice?"

"Leave it here," Trell told her. "Corran said we wouldn't want to get caught shipping spice, and I'm rather inclined to agree with him."

"We can call CorSec on the way and tell them where to pick it up," Riiij added. "Now let's go."

They all piled into the landspeeder. "Speaking of Corran and CorSec," Trell commented as he spun the vehicle around and kicked power to the engines. "Turns out they're one and the same."

"Corran's with Corellian Security?" Maranne asked, frowning at him. "You're joking."

"That's how he and Hal were talking, anyway," Trell said. "Last we saw, they were heading off after Thyne."

Riiij winced. "In the middle of Thyne's fortress? They haven't got a chance."

"That was also our estimation," Palror agreed. "But counting the number of Thyne's warriors here and those fighting the Imperials outside his stronghold, it seems likely the core areas within may have been nearly deserted."

"'Nearly' might not have been good enough," Maranne said. "And what about Kast? He was still there, wasn't he?"

"I've given up trying to guess what kind of game Kast is playing," Trell said, twisting the landspeeder hard to get around a Herglic-parked speeder truck. "All I know is that he's the one who gave Corran the molecular stiletto that got us out of there."

"And we do not believe it was merely a trap," Palror added. "We were challenged by Imperial TIE bombers as we left the stronghold; yet upon identification, we were permitted to pass."

"That had to be Corran and Hal's doing," Trell said. "CorSec's supposed to be working pretty closely with the Imperials these days."

"Yes," Riiij murmured, thinking back to the brief argument he'd had with Corran about the Rebellion. And now to find out Corran was actually CorSec. Could he have guessed Riiij's true loyalties from that conversation?

"We were both permitted to pass," Palror reminded him softly.

"I understand," Riiij told him. "I also understand that the way everything else here's been going, that doesn't mean a whole lot. If we get to the *Hopskip* without running into an ambush -- from any of the sides of this crazy powerplay -- then maybe I'll believe we've gotten away with it."

"Gotten away with what?" Maranne asked.

Riiij spread his hands. "With whatever in blazes we did here."

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There was indeed no ambush poised outside the *Hopskip*. Nor were any of their former companions -- Corran, Hal, or Kast -- waiting there.

What *was* there was a single datacard.

"Looks like the same stuff that Kast used to stick the molecular stiletto to Corran's cell bars," Trell commented, poking experimentally at the bits of adhesive residue that had been left on the datacard. "Should we read it here, or inside?"

"Inside," Riiij said firmly, taking the datacard from him and glancing around. "And not until we're out of here. You and Maranne get the pre-flight started; Palror and I'll check to make sure no one left us any surprises."

Trell had the engines nursed and sputtering to life, and Maranne had the nav computer working on their course, when Riiij and Palror returned from their tour of the ship. "Looks clean," Riiij told the others as the two of them took their seats. "Or at least, there's nothing obvious. You talked to the tower yet?"

"We're third in line to leave," Maranne told him. "You want to read us a sleepy-time story now?"

"Sure," Riiij said. From behind Trell came a faint rubbing sound -- Riiij getting the last bits of adhesive off the datacard, probably -- and then the brief scraping as he slid it into his datapad. "It's from Kast," Riiij said. "'To the crew and passengers of the *Hopskip*: well done."

"Well *done*?" Maranne growled. "What in blazes--?"

"Shh," Trell cut her off. "Go on."

"You have adequately completed the mission that was assigned you," Riiij continued. "You may return now to the *Admonitor* and retrieve your cargo. This datacard will serve as proof to Captain Niriz that you have fulfilled your side of the bargain and may have your cargo returned to you.' Then it's signed with his name and what looks like some kind of ID mark."

"So he's not going back, huh?" Trell said, an odd feeling stirring in the pit of his stomach. "I'm not sure I like that."

"He must have arranged his payment to be delivered somewhere else," Maranne said. "It didn't look like he and Niriz got along very well."

"Perhaps his payment is in the remainder of the *sleight* boxes," Palror said.

"I wouldn't count on it," Riiij said. "There's a postscript: 'Do not return to the Dewback Storage yard for the other *sleight* boxes. They are empty.'"

"What?" Trell growled, half turning to glare back at Riiij over his shoulder. "Come on, now, that's just crazy. You're telling me the two boxes you happened to take to the Mynock's Haven were the only ones with anything in them? What are the odds of that happening?"

"Not too bad, really," Maranne said grimly. "Not when you consider that they were the only two we knew we could open and then reseal again. They were leading us around by the nose the whole way, weren't they?"

"The whole way," Riiij agreed. "'And don't bother with either the Durindfire gems or the spice. Both are counterfeit.'"

Trell looked across the cockpit, to find Maranne looking back at him. There didn't seem to be anything to say.

There was another faint scraping behind him as Riiij pulled the datacard from the datapad. "Look, we got in and out again alive," he reminded them, reaching over Trell's shoulder to hand him the datacard. "My instructors used to say that no mission you walked away from was a complete failure. Maybe we'll meet Corran and Hal someday and find out what this whole thing was all about."

Trell turned the datacard over in his hand. "I doubt it," he said. "I'd say chances are good that neither of them knew what was going on, either."

He slid the datacard into a storage slot on his board. "Come on, Maranne. Let's get out of here."

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"I know this sort of thing embarrasses you," Captain Niriz said as he poured his guest a glass of aged R'alla mineral water, "so I'll only say it once. When I heard the reports of military action on Corellia, I was concerned for your safety. I'm glad to find out my fears were unfounded."

"Thank you, Captain," Grand Admiral Thrawn said, accepting the proffered glass and taking a sip. He was still wearing his Jodo Kast armor, though without the helmet and gauntlets. "You're wrong, though, about expressions of concern and support being an embarrassment. On the contrary, loyalty is one of the two qualities I value most in my subordinates and colleagues."

"And the other?" Niriz asked, pouring a glass of R'alla water for himself.

"Competence," Thrawn said. "Has the *Hopskip*'s cargo been reloaded aboard yet?"

"It's being done, sir," Niriz said. With most people, he thought distantly, the addition of Mandalorian armor would instantly create a powerful air of strength and mystery. With Thrawn, in contrast, it almost seemed to detract from the sense of authority that was already there. "The bridge has orders to let me know when they leave." He cocked an eyebrow. "Which reminds me: you promised to let me know what all this was about when you returned."

"And I intend to do so," Thrawn assured him. "I'm waiting for one other person to join us here first."

Behind Niriz, the door slid open. Niriz turned, opening his mouth to reprimand whoever this officer or crewer was who would dare enter the captain's private office without permission

And an instant later was scrambling to his feet, the harsh words dying in his throat as if they had been choked to death. The armored figure striding with casual arrogance through the door.

"Ah; Lord Vader," Thrawn said, rising more easily to his feet. "Welcome aboard the *Admonitor*. We're honored by your presence."



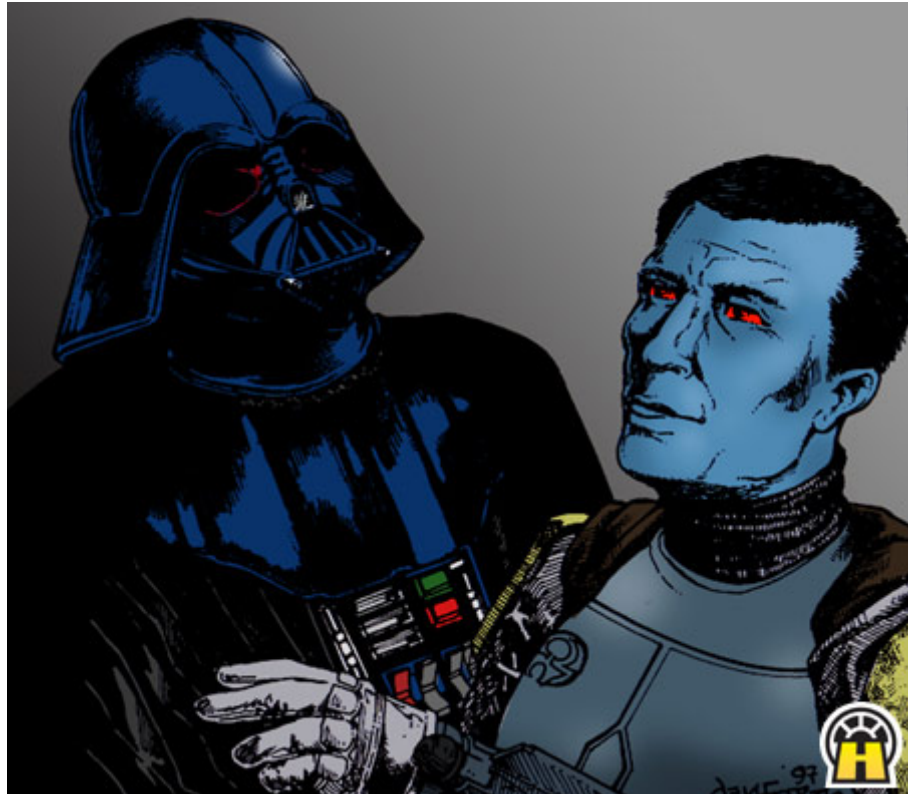
"As we are with yours, Admiral Thrawn," Lord Darth Vader said, a distinct edge of challenge in his deep voice. "You're nearly six hours late."

"I know, my Lord, and I apologize for keeping you waiting," Thrawn said, nodding his head deferentially. "As it turned out, I was forced to significantly modify the plan I originally outlined to you."

"But the objective *was* achieved?" Vader demanded.

"It was indeed," Thrawn said. "Zekka Thyne and the Corellian branch of Prince Xizor's Black Sun have been effectively eliminated."

Niriz looked at Thrawn in surprise. "Zekka Thyne? But I thought--"



"You thought the Emperor had an arrangement with Xizor?" Vader demanded, turning that grisly mask toward him.

Niriz swallowed. Vader's reputation concerning flag officers who had displeased him... but on the other hand, Thrawn demanded absolute honesty from his subordinates. "Yes, my Lord," he said. "I did."

Vader's stiff posture seemed to ease slightly. "For the moment, perhaps, that is true. But such arrangements are made to be altered." He turned back to Thrawn. "Yet I understood there was Imperial action against Thyne's stronghold."

"A small battle only," Thrawn assured him. "And the battle was instigated from Thyne's side, as both sides' recorders will bear out. The record will also show the Imperials were in the area solely because of information their commander received suggesting a Rebel force was gathering in the forest there."

"Information which you supplied, of course?" Vader asked.

"Of course," Thrawn nodded. "And since there can be no possible link between the verification code I used and any of your forces or contacts, Prince Xizor will be unable to create any connection between you and the mysterious informant."

"Yet Imperial troops *were* involved," Vader persisted. "His first thought will certainly be of me."

Thrawn shook his head. "In fact, my Lord, the marginal Imperial involvement will actually tend to exonerate you in his eyes. He would expect you to launch either a full-fledged Imperial attack -- which he could easily trace back to you -- or else to scrupulously avoid Imperial forces entirely, relying perhaps on your quiet bounty hunter or mercenary contacts. The ambiguity of the actual event will leave him confused and uncertain. Which, I believe, was one of your key objectives."

"It was," Vader said, sounding a little uncertain. "But as you say, Xizor knows of my bounty hunter connections. Even though Jodo Kast is not among them, your assassination of Thyne while disguised as Kast will again lead his attention to me."

Thrawn smiled. "Yes, but I *didn't* assassinate Thyne. I was able to leave his fate in the hands of a pair of undercover CorSec agents."

Vader cocked his head slightly to the side. "I don't recall Corellian Security ever being mentioned in our discussions, Admiral."

"The two agents attached themselves to my group," Thrawn said. "And it was obvious right from the start that they were in Coronet City for the specific purpose of getting to Thyne. It presented such a perfect opportunity that I decided to modify the original plan so that they would be the ones to deal with him."

"Then Thyne isn't dead?"

Thrawn shrugged. "At the very least he's out of power," he said. "Actually, having him in CorSec custody would actually serve your purposes better than a quick death. It would leave Prince Xizor wondering if the Corellians were digging any dangerous secrets out of him. A major distraction; and distraction, I believe, was another of your key objectives."

There was a tone from the comm. Stepping to the console, Niriz keyed it on. "Niriz," he said.

"Hangar Bay Control, sir," a voice said. "Reporting as per orders that the *Hopskip* has just left."

"Thank you," Niriz said. "Signal the bridge to watch its vector when it jumps to lightspeed."

"Yes, sir."

Niriz keyed the comm off. "I gather the smugglers and their Rebel friends performed their part adequately?" Vader asked.

"Quite adequately," Thrawn assured him. "They provided the necessary excuse for me to move Thyne's men out and clear the way for the CorSec agents."

The unseen eyes behind the black mask seemed to bore into Thrawn's face. "And the other part of your plan?"

Thrawn cocked a blue-black eyebrow at Niriz. "Captain?"

"Yes, sir," Niriz said. "A homing device has been installed inside each of the hidden blasters they were smuggling."

"And the boxes repacked exactly as they were?"

"To the millimeter," Niriz confirmed. "They'll have no way of knowing the boxes were even opened, let alone tampered with."

The Dark Lord nodded. "Excellent," he said.

The comm pinged again. "Captain, this is the bridge. The *Hopskip* just jumped to lightspeed. Their vector's confirmed for the Shibric system."

"Thank you." Niriz looked at Thrawn, lifted his eyebrows.

The Grand Admiral nodded. "Have them prepare a course back to the Unknown Regions," he instructed. "Our task here is finished."

"Yes, sir." Niriz gave the order and keyed off the comm.

"Unless," Thrawn added, looking at Vader, "you'd like me to deal with Prince Xizor directly for you."

"It is indeed a tempting thought," Vader said, his voice dark with veiled menace. "One alien against another? But no. Xizor is mine."

"As you wish," Thrawn said. "Incidentally, I doubt that Shibric is the final destination for those Rebel blasters. From their vector, and other bits and pieces I gleaned along the trip, my guess is that their ultimate collection point will be somewhere in the Derra system."

"The homing devices will show us for certain," Vader said. "But the Derra system is rumored to have a strong Rebel presence. I'll make sure to have some forces waiting there."

"Very good," Thrawn said. "One final suggestion, and then I suspect we must both be on our separate ways. I understand the general in command of the *Executor*'s ground forces resigned suddenly a month ago. I was able to watch the battle outside Thyne's stronghold for a while as I waited to make sure the smugglers escaped; and in my opinion the Imperial officer in command is being wasted in a garrison assignment."

"Your opinion carries considerable weight," Vader said. "As I'm sure you know. The officer's name?"

"Colonel Veers," Thrawn said. "From the level of his tactical skill, I'd also say he's long overdue for a promotion. Perhaps his political connections within the command structure leave something to be desired."

"Political connections do not concern me," Vader rumbled, stepping to the door. "I will see what I can do with this Colonel Veers. Thank you, Admiral."

"My pleasure, Lord Vader," Thrawn said with a respectful tilt of his head. "One favor for another. Perhaps we'll have the chance to work again together."

Once again, the hidden eyes seemed to probe the Grand Admiral's face. "Perhaps," he said. "Farewell, Admiral."

And with a swirl of his long cloak he was gone. "An interesting exercise," Thrawn commented, crossing to the R'alla bottle and refilling his and Niriz's glasses. "I don't know though. I sense that this Rebellion is more powerful and better organized than perhaps Lord Vader realizes. I hope our activities here will allow him to deliver a crushing blow against it."

His glowing red eyes glittered as he took a sip from his glass. "But that's not our concern, at least for now. Our concern is the Unknown Regions; and it's time we were getting back."

"Yes, sir." Niriz hesitated. "If I may be so bold, Admiral... your last comment implied that you received something in return for helping Vader against Thyne and Black Sun. May I ask what that favor was?"

"A very personal gift, Captain," Thrawn said. "Which was why I felt the need to personally orchestrate Thyne's destruction. Lord Vader has turned over to me command of a group of alien commandos who have proven themselves highly valuable to him over the years. While I won't have much use for them in the Unknown Regions, I have no doubt I'll eventually be returning to the Empire proper. At that time -- well, we shall see what they can do."

"I never heard of Vader employing aliens," Niriz said doubtfully. "Are you sure he's telling -- well --"

"The truth?" Thrawn smiled. "Indeed he is. Mark their name well, Captain: the Noghri. I guarantee you'll be hearing more of them."

He drained his glass and set it down. "But now to the bridge. The Unknown Regions are calling; and we have a great deal of work yet to do."